Developing Communicative Ability in the Japanese University Non-English Major Classroom: A Pre-test/ Post-test Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the performance of non-English major university students on a pre-test and post-test examination of oral conversational ability. Participants were second year Japanese students at a private university in Tokyo who received, as part of a required one-semester oral communication course, ten-minute weekly instruction in initiating, maintaining, and closing a conversation according to communicative principles. The results indicated significant gains in both the indirect post-test of conversational ability and direct examination. Researchers further reported significant increases in confidence, motivation, and communicative ability throughout the semester. Implications are discussed in terms of the development of communicative ability through both the sequenced instructional presentation of syllabus and optimal grouping arrangements during oral activities to encourage language output.

Key Words : oral communication（オーラル・コミュニケーション），non-English majors（非英語専攻），communicative competence（コミュニケーション能力），fluency development（流暢さの開発），context of learning（学習の内容），hypothesis testing（仮説検証），noticing（気づき），interlanguage（中間言語），conversation strategies（会話方略），cooperative learning（共同学習）

1. Introduction

Most non-English major students demonstrate a strong analytical understanding of English. Yet, while possessing some knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, they quite often lack the fluency and strategic components that enable them to translate that knowledge into smooth and effective oral communication. Accordingly, there has long been a consensus in second language learning that not only language input is essential for normal language learning, but there is also the need for a specific kind of language output, such as conversational

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practice (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Pica, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). In recent years some commercial textbooks have endeavored to incorporate Canale & Swain's (1980) notion of communicative competence into their design. The numerous difficulties encountered by teachers who have attempted to encourage communicative activities in their classrooms however has continued to be expressed in the literature (Sakui, 2007; Wee & Jacobs, 2006). Issues such as problematic classroom management, low motivation, and students' incapacity to demonstrate communicative ability in unrehearsed conversations are pervasive in both high school and university contexts. With careful consideration of the instructional approach, however, (see Myskow et al., 2008 for specific suggestions on classroom management), the incorporation of a communicative element into the syllabus – even with large university classes – can be less of a struggle to overcome.

This article presents the results of a thirteen-week course of study that was designed to incorporate a ten-minute conversational component into an existing syllabus. The goal was to develop the students' ability to hold an unrehearsed conversation with a peer while adhering to the communicative principles that are common to native speaker conversation. In addition, the article presents and discusses examples of the syllabus materials used and offers suggestions for their effective implementation.

2. Key Areas for Consideration in Conversational Development

Language teachers have always been concerned with establishing whether their teaching and materials are effectively promoting the development of fluency. Will the textbooks and the tasks they contain enable the students to communicate effectively once they have stepped outside the classroom? In other words, do our means facilitate the ends? In order to help us address this question there are certain matters closely related to the development of conversational ability that need to be considered.

2.1 Context of Learning

The opportunities available for conversational development broadly depend upon the focus of language instruction in the classroom and the degree to which the language can be experienced in the broader community. Given the focus of many high school English classes on translation and discreet point testing of grammatical items, the vast majority of university students have developed only an analytical understanding of English. That is, they often possess some knowledge of grammar and vocabulary yet lack the fluency that would enable them to translate that knowledge into smooth and effective communication. While there have been many prominent studies that have demonstrated the efficacy of grammatical instruction (for example, Doughty, 1991; Pica, 1985), there have also been those which have shown the strongest gains were made by students who had received both grammar instruction and communicative practice (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1986).

Of course, performing well orally is not contingent upon knowledge of grammar and vocabulary or speaking practice alone. Students also need to be able to make sense of the language input (grammar, vocabulary, and intended meaning) they hear in order to respond appropriately. While there are no doubt plentiful opportunities in the EFL classroom for the kind of comprehensible input proposed by Krashen (1981), the EFL context in many respects limits a student's exposure to real exam-

ples of the target language and opportunities available for regular and reflective practice outside of the classroom. It is clearly necessary, therefore, to provide students with a variety of opportunities for both language input and language output – a view which has long been supported by prominent researchers in the field of second language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Pica, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

2.2 Hypothesis Testing and Noticing

In the Japanese EFL classroom, as students test out their knowledge of the English language system in both writing and speech, they receive feedback from their interlocutors (teacher and peers) as to the effectiveness of their communications – is their writing comprehensible or was their utterance understood? The noticing (Schmidt, 1994) of learners' own errors as well as forcing the learner to make grammatical and lexical decisions (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) through communicative activities, can provide the necessary attention to grammatical form and a continued awareness of their own developing language ability. This approach is said to facilitate the progressive narrowing of the gap between the learner's native language and the target language. While the concept of noticing has been criticized for a lack of empirical data to validate it (Cross, 2002), it is, nevertheless, a useful concept to guide our current understanding of how students might be interacting with the language they are learning and how the occurrence of that language in comprehensible contexts can reduce attrition and facilitate language development.

2.3 First Language Interference & Interlanguage

In spite of the grammar and vocabulary taught in English classes, however, transfer from the learner's native language can have a significant impact on the degree to which they are able, at any one point in their learning, to acquire, and use for communicative purposes, the target language. When communicating, deficiencies or gaps in target language are usually bridged by the application of the first language system. Put another way, when a Japanese student's knowledge of a grammatical rule in the target language is insufficient, they might still attempt communication by applying English vocabulary to the syntactic or grammatical structure of Japanese. For instance, in the Japanese language, the structure that is often considered the equivalent of the present progressive is actually used to describe daily routines yet in the English language the present simple is generally used. Excluding the possibility of performance errors, the utterance, "*Every day I am going to school*" (in Japanese, *mainichi gakko ni itte imasu*) is likely to indicate an insufficient knowledge of how to appropriately employ this grammar to fulfill the communicative function – albeit a worthy attempt to communicate.

Interlanguage (Selinker, 1972), therefore, refers to the independent developing system of rules that lie somewhere between the learner's native language and the target language. Through the course of their study, as students develop more understanding of how the target language is used, they progressively (yet not always linearly) adjust this interlingual system to more closely approximate that of the target language (Corder, 1978).

2.4 Strategic Competence

While theoretical concepts such as interlanguage can assist in clarifying the role first language plays when communicating in a foreign language, another important area that has re-

ceived much attention over the last three decades is that of strategic competence and the centrality of conversation strategies to the process of effective communication.

Described in much of the early research as verbal or non-verbal devices for bridging the gaps in L2 proficiency (Tarone, 1977), conversation strategies (see Figure 3 for examples) have come to be viewed more as risk-taking, achievement orientated strategies that serve in the negotiation of meaning (Tarone, 1980), the enhancement of effective communication (Canale, 1983; Faerch & Kasper, 1984), and for the maintenance of conversational interactions (Nakatani, 2005).

Dornyei and Thurall (1991) claim, development in this area largely determines the conversational fluency of the student. McGillick (1993) goes one step further by suggesting that it is the obligation of teachers to make students aware of such strategies and their role in conversation. The value of teaching these strategies is further highlighted by the results of Nakatani's (2005) experimental study of 62 EFL students which indicated that communicative practice alone was insufficient in developing conversational ability. Students receiving strategy development were more able to negotiate meaning and maintain a conversation.

The development of conversation strategies would appear, therefore, central to effective instruction in a foreign language. There has been much discussion in the literature regarding the various taxonomies of conversation strategies (Corder, 1981; Dornyei & Scott, 1997; Dornyei & Thurall, 1994; Tarone, 1977; Yarmohammadi & Seif, 1992) and their place in a syllabus of study with some limited discussion of classroom activities (Dornyei & Thurall, 1991, 1994). Bridging the divide between syllabus suggestions and the classroom in order to integrate the instruction of conversational strategies into a sustained and systematic course of study has remained, for many teachers, somewhat of a challenge.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to measure non-English major, second-year Japanese university students' development in general conversational ability using a syllabus containing pre-determined sociolinguistic and strategic aspects of communicative competence. This would inform the researchers as to what degree the students can learn an intensive syllabus of such components and draw on them in initiating, maintaining, and closing a conversation according to communicative principles. To determine this, the following research questions were posed:

1) To what degree can students accurately produce appropriate sociolinguistic and strategic responses on an indirect test of general conversational ability?
2) To what degree can students draw on such syllabus components to initiate, maintain, and close a one-minute conversation with a randomly selected partner in a direct test of general conversational ability?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

In total, 57 second year non-English major university students were comprehensively selected from two of the researcher's classes. All were Japanese females and were taking the English lesson as a required course for one class per week (one and a half hours) over fifteen weeks in total.

4.2 Procedures

Prior to instruction, participants were administered an indirect oral pre-test (Figure 1) of their communicative ability which incorporated the vast majority of conversation strategies contained in the syllabus (Figure 2). In week 15, the same indirect post-test was again administered and the gain scores analyzed. Students were not aware of the purposes for pre–testing and post-testing.

As students had neither met their teacher nor their classmates, the researchers decided that a direct test administered at the start of semester (where students sit face-to-face and are asked to hold a conversation) would not have produced reliable results due to student inhibitions being particularly high during this period. Instead, the direct test of oral communication was administered at the end of semester only.

The learning activity students engaged in over the course of the semester was referred to as Peer Talk and is designed to give students the opportunity for free conversation during which they have the opportunity to incorporate their learned conversation expressions and strategies into a meaningful conversation with their peers. As learners test out their developing language hypotheses in a non-intimidating context, they receive feedback from their peers as to the effectiveness of their communication,

Figure1
Pre-test and Post-Test Paper (possible answers have been inserted)

Peer Talk (2 points each = 34 points)

E: Hey, Pablo.

P: ___HI___ (1), Ethan. How's it ___GOING___ (2)?

E: Pretty __GOOD__ (3). How __ABOUT___ (4) you?

P: Not so __GOOD___ (5).

E: Oh, __REALLY___ (6)? What's wrong?

P: ___WELL___ (7), I don't where my cell phone is.

E: Sorry, __WHAT__ (8) was that?

P: I said I think I've lost my cell phone.

E: ___NO___ (9) way! ___YOU___ (10) are kidding! Have you found it yet?

P: No, not yet. I think I have to get a new one.

E: Oh, that's too ___BAD___ (11).

P: __ANYWAY_ (12). How was your weekend? What did you do?

E: Erm... ___LET___ (13) me see... Oh, I remember! I went to the movies with some friends.

P: The movies? That _SOUNDS_ (14) nice! What did you __SEE___ (15)?

E: Erm...I can't remember! I guess it wasn't very good. Well, nice _TALKING_ (16) to you. I hope you can get a new phone soon!

P: Yeah. Me, too. __SEE___ (17) you later.

E: Alright, take care. Bye!

Figure 2
Conversation Strategies Syllabus

Current English IIA: Conversation Strategies

	Strategy / Skill
1	**Basic Openings:** a. How are you? **Responses:** a. Pretty good. b. OK. c. Not so good. **Basic Questions at introduction time:** a. Hometown b. Interests c. Dreams **Basic farewell:** a. Well, see you later. (Response="Yeah, see you.")
2	*Introduce Shadow Conversation* **Openings 1:** a. How's it going? (Response="And you?") **Body Language:** b. Maintaining eye contact
3	**Attending 1:** a. Really? b. Yeah? c. Oh, yeah. d. That (sounds) nice /etc.
4	**Closing 1:** a. See you later. b. Bye! c. Well, I have to go. d. Hey, I gotta go.
5	**Specific opening questions** a. So, what did you do last weekend? **Turn Taking** b. How/What about you?
6	*Start Peer Talk (1:00)* **Attending 2:** a. No way! b. You're joking!/kidding! c. That's too bad.
7.	**Openings 2:** a. What's up? (Response="Not much. How about you?" "Not much.")
8	**Asking for clarification:** a. Sorry, I don't understand. b. Sorry, what was that?
9	**Asking follow up questions.** (E.g. "WH" questions)
10	**Responding with sufficient detail**
11	**Fillers:** a. Erm… b. Let me see… a. Well…
12	**Topic changing:** a. So,… b. Anyway,… c. By the way…
13	**Closing 2:** a. Well, nice talking to you.

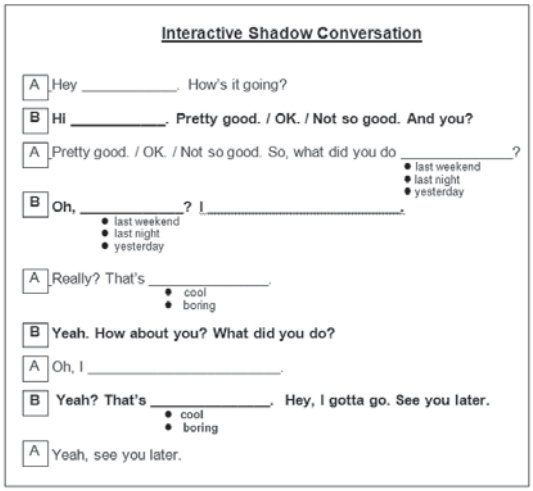
that is, was their utterance understood? And, did they effectively communicate their intended meaning? Importantly, the researchers did not prescribe a conversation topic in order to avoid restricting students to a conversational area in which they might have little interest or would have too much difficulty expressing themselves. Where topics were suggested, these were presented as conversation starters such as, "So, what did you do last weekend?"

The procedures for the instructional process of Peer Talk were conducted as follows (time: 10 minutes):

4.2.1 Weeks two to five:

1) Students are directed to their conversation strategies syllabus as the teacher fronts an explanation of the week's teaching point.
2) Standing (to encourage attention and provide focus), in groups of four (A, B, C, D students) learners pair off (A & B and C & D) to practice the shadow role-play (Figure 3). It is important to note that prior to this step, students are normally sitting in their rows. When group or pair work is required, students simply turn to face their predetermined groups or partners. This is an effective means by which to organize the class as it enables teachers to efficiently arrange students into particular groupings with minimal disruption.
3) When the first pairs complete their role-play, they turn and continue with their next partner. In this case, A & D and B & C. Once completed, they turn and face their next partner, A & C and B & D.
4) When all students have finished their conversations, they sit down. This indicates to the teacher which groups have finished and encourages the remaining ones to hurry along.

Figure 3
Interactive Shadow Conversation



4.2.2 Weeks six to fourteen – Peer Talk:

1) Students are directed to their conversation strategies syllabus as the teacher fronts an explanation of the week's teaching point.
2) Following step one above, from the front of the classroom the teacher then coaches students on specific aspects of the Peer Talk test rubric (Figure 4) and other aspects of conversation. To increase instrumental motivation, students are informed they will take a direct oral examination at the end of the semester and be graded using the test rubric.
3) In groups of four (A, B, C, D students) students pair off (A & B, C & D). A timer on the blackboard is set to one minute and the first pairs in each group simultaneously engage in free conversation.
4) At the end of the time, the teacher provides any remedial feedback necessary and starts from step 4 again. This time pairs A & D and B & C converse. This step is then repeated for pairs A & C and B & D. (This system of pairing is based upon Spencer Kagan's Co-

operative Learning structure called Cross Box.)

5) To encourage participation and accountability, after the class has completed the activity, the teacher may randomly select either a pair of students to stand and hold a conversation, or the teacher might choose to hold a conversation with one student.

In week 15, pairs of students were randomly selected by the teacher to sit the direct test of communicative ability which consisted of a one-minute unrehearsed Peer Talk conversation (see test rubric Figure 4). Importantly, students had received the Peer Talk test rubric in week six and were instructed to study it each week during the class. They were further informed that it would be used in the examination in week 15.

Figure 4
Direct Test Peer Talk Rubric

PEER TALK TEST	Total 合計
A) **Student uses Opening** Hi./ How's it going?/ Hello./ How are you?/ What's up?/ How about you?/ Pretty good./ And you? Other: _____	/2
B) **Student uses expressions for listening** Really? Yeah? That sounds nice!/ etc. Oh, yeah. No way! You're joking/ kidding! That's too bad. Other: _____	/3
C) **Student uses Closing** Well nice talking to you. (I) gotta go. (See) you later. Well, I have to go now. Bye. See you. Other: _____	/1
D) **Student changes the subject** So$_{eee}$ (So,) Anyway$_{eee}$ By the way$_{eee}$ Other: _____	/1
E) **Student uses casual pronunciation** Yes/yes Whaddaya gonna wanna whaddidya for (of)=a ya Other: _____	/4
F) **Student asks a question/follow-up question** What/Where/When/Who/How/Why_____? Is/Do/Are _____? Other: _____	/3
G) **Student responds to questions with sufficient detail**	/4
H) **Student speaks with fluency and does not pause or hesitate**	/3
I) **Conversation has a logical order and is natural**	/4
J) **Grammar & vocabulary are used accurately** Notes:	/4
	Total /28

4.3 Analysis

Using SPSS software, a paired T-Test was conducted to compare the pre and post-test means of the group. Where the F value indicated the gain difference in means was statistically significant, effect size was calculated via the Eta squared formula to determine the degree of importance. The magnitude was interpreted as 0.01=small effect, 0.06=moderate effect, and 0.14=large effect (Cohen, 1988). Alpha levels were set at $p < .05$.

5. Results

5.1 To what degree can students accurately produce appropriate sociolinguistic and strategic responses on an indirect test of general conversational ability?

A paired-samples T-Test was conducted in order to evaluate the impact of instruction on students' scores on the indirect pre-test and post–test. The pre-test and post-test means shown in Table 1 indicate there was a statistically significant increase in scores between the pre-test (M=12.60, SD=6.69) and post-test (M=25.12, SD=4.69), $t(56)=-16.13$, $p<.0005$ (two-tailed). The mean increase in scores was 12.52 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 10.97 to 14.08. The magnitude of the difference in the means was significantly large (eta squared=0.80) indicating that the results are both significant and meaningful, confirming

Table 1 Paired-Samples T-Test of the Students' Raw Score Performance* on the Indirect Pre-test and Post-Tests (N=57)

	M	*SD*	*df*	*t*	Effect Size[a]
Pre	12.60	6.686	56	−16.133**	.80
Post	25.12	4.691			

* Maximum Possible Score=34
** p<.0005.
[a] Eta squared.

students benefited considerably from their course of study.

5.2 To what degree can students draw on such syllabus components to initiate, maintain, and close a one-minute conversation with a randomly selected partner in a direct test of general conversational ability?

A direct test of conversational ability was administered as the final examination. The raw score results (maximum score possible=28) from the direct test indicate M=20.93, SD=4.12, N=60. This was 75% represented as an overall percentage.

6. Discussion

According to the results, the students made significant gains in the post-test. This is a very strong indication that the syllabus, materials, and instruction were effective. While it cannot be determined without isolating each of these variables (in control and experimental group research) which had the most significant effect on the students' learning, it is clear from this study that the students have become proficient in the syllabus content to a significant degree and were able to demonstrate this in both the indirect and direct test of communicative ability.

Additionally, it can be seen from the standard deviations in Table 1 that while both the pre-test and post-test scores indicate that the class remain somewhat heterogeneous, there is also the indication in the lower post-test standard deviation that a larger majority of student scores are now grouped more closely around the mean. One reason for this could have been that stronger students who scored particularly high on the pre-test (thereby increasing the standard deviation), did not do so on the post-test, scoring closer to the class average (thereby reducing the standard deviation). However, a closer examination of the individual raw scores showed that all but one student (who scored perfectly on both the pre-test and post-test) made gains – in most cases substantially – over the course of the semester. It is more likely, therefore, that the class, as a whole, by scoring more highly on the post-test became more homogenously grouped around a higher class average. In terms of the American slogan, "No child left behind", this is certainly an encouraging result as it shows all students have improved.

While data from only one of the researchers was used in the current study, the same syllabus was also being taught in other classes. It was reported here that not only were there positive results regarding test and examination scores, but also that in spite of the classes being taught in both first and second periods motivation was considerably high (and attendance!), which increased as the semester progressed. Given that the students share the same first language and that the Peer Talk activity requires the students to use only English (in order to encourage the hypothesis testing, noticing, and negotiation of meaning), it is essential that students are sufficiently motivated to engage enthusiastically in the task, which these groups appear to have been.

There were several ways in which teachers made efforts to maintain motivation. Firstly, providing a structured sociolinguistic and strategic syllabus allowed students to build on previous learning and progress continuously, which might have increased intrinsic motivation for further study. In addition, by guiding the students through controlled role-plays to freer communication in Peer Talk it was possible for them to develop both language skills and confidence. Further, the sociolinguistic aspects

of the syllabus that helped 'smooth' communication as well as the conversation strategies that served to sustain the interaction gave students greater confidence to hold their conversations maintaining the all important English only rule. Importantly, the Cooperative Structure 'Cross Box' provided the opportunity for successive chances to improve on the previous conversations, a variety of speaking partners, and clear uncomplicated task goals. Finally, the instrumental motivation of both a teacher check at the end of the task as well as a final examination matched exactly to their syllabus of study may have encouraged these students to become actively involved.

7. Conclusions

The vast majority of non-English major students have only an analytical understanding of English, that is, they possess knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but lack the skill component, which enables them to translate that knowledge into smooth and effective oral communication. In order to encourage meaningful communication among students, it is clear we need to provide them with a variety of opportunities for language output. This can range from the confidence building, semi–controlled role-plays (common to textbooks and the initial materials used in weeks two to five of the present study) to more cognitively demanding, interactive activities such as Peer Talk (used in weeks six to fourteen) in which students are required to pay attention to what they hear in order to maintain a meaningful conversation. By requiring students to make their own decisions about how and what they say, we are encouraging them to draw on their tentatively acquired knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and make choices as to what is effective when communicating. As many educators know from their own language studies, speaking the language forces us to try out our ideas about how the target language actually works, and in doing so provides us with feedback and encouragement from our partners.

In the Japanese EFL context where students normally share the same first language and where varying levels of motivation can exist, it is of primary importance that we both encourage the meaningful use of English between students, and importantly provide them with the conversational strategies and tools to be successful in doing so. Given the appropriate tools and task conditions, students will have greater opportunities to engage in more meaningful interactions.

EFL students need to develop a new view of oral classes that does not involve a solely academic approach to the study of English. Rather, one that engenders a spirit of experimental risk-taking in order to achieve the fluency and communication skills which most of our students expect from their investment in language learning. It is hoped, therefore, that in some way the results of this current study will encourage instructors to incorporate such regular fluency based instruction into their present curriculum.

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